

Fortnightly Sermon

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DOING AND KNOWING

II.

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DOING AND KNOWING.

II.

"If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the teaching."—John, vii, 17.

I resume the subject of moral life in relation to religious feeling, treated in my last sermon.

I said, in that sermon, that emotion in religion is brought forth very easily; that therefore it runs the danger of being made by devices and excitements instead of being a natural slow and beautiful growth; that, contrariwise, moral worth, right living is difficult, a hard and long battle, a strenuous strife; and that therefore goodness of life must go with, and even fore-go, emotion in religion,—the base and ground of the edification, the rock; on which founded, the temple will out-stand all storms and the daily hammering of time. This, I said, was one of the deep reasons why he that doeth the will of God is he who shall know the things of God; because a kind of revel or abandonment in the thought of God, (ah! impious! a mournful thing!) is easy, and often verily a seduction; but to do His Will is hard—a watch, an undertaking, a travail; and the strong discipline of morals is the condition and means of true apprehension of God and of health of feeling in religion. Without this, emotion is but vapors, even perhaps unholy fumes in riotous company.

I come now to another great depth of this deep teaching of the Master.

There is a great law of our constitutions which expresses the dependence of the religious on the moral. That law is the law governing all active exertion on the one hand, and all passive emotion on the other hand. I may call it the law of passivity and activity. The law is this, that in emotions we are passive,

being merely acted on, subjected to impressions, affected by passing conditions or circumstances; that, contrariwise, in any exercise of the will we are active, acting on others or on conditions, producing impressions on others or on circumstances; that all emotions, because we are only passive objects of them, tend to decrease in power by repetition, so that the more they prevail the weaker they grow, and therefore the less tending to come vigorously into consciousness; that, contrariwise, all exercises of will, because in them we are not objects of impressions but active agents, tend to increase in power by repetition, so that the more they are transacted the stronger they grow, and tend the more to assert themselves in action and to be repeated. This is the law of passivity and activity. To state it briefly, emotions, as being passive impressions, fade and weaken by repetition; but active exercise of will strengthens by repetition. Both passive affections and active efforts, emotion and volition, feeling and willing, become *habits* by repetition of them; but just in proportion as we drift into a feeling by habit, it is listless, flaccid, ceases to be a great and strong feeling; but, contrariwise, when acts of will become habits, it is because they have grown so strong by exercise that they run over oppositions like a tide and are put forth almost unconscious of any resistance, although at first the resistance taxed the strength. In brief, passive habits are weakness, but active habits are strength; in other words, emotions that become habits, do so because the emotion weakens; but exercises that become habits, do so because the will strengthens.

This law pertaining to active effort and passive affections, takes a very benevolent part in Providence, preventing much pain. There are persons, like physicians, nurses, charity agents, who are called, by a sympathetic nature or by professional duty, to be familiar with scenes of suffering. The emotions of sympathy, pity, horror, aroused in such scenes may be exceeding painful. They may amount to a piercing distress, a torment of memory, a shock and horror which fill the mind, seize the imagination, and become harrowing sympathies continually arising. Very like such a person is prompted at first to seek out and relieve the sufferer by his own sympathetic distress. This distress may be so great that he has no harder task than to witness the suffering during his efforts to relieve it. What if these emotions

of pity and horror relaxed never, never weakened, but always continued to be strong torments? Who then could endure a life passed in these benevolent professions or in works of mercy? Or if, by love and self-sacrifice, one clung to the work, what a terrible life-long martyrdom, in which so severe an anguish should be repeated with every act of duty! But now comes this law of the passive affections and the active powers, to work a most merciful benefit. The pangs of sympathetic pity, horror, terror, are passive affections. Therefore the sympathetic suffering of those who minister to pain and wretchedness gradually extinguishes itself. With every repetition of the brave duty, the painful emotions attending it grow less. But is this a hardening of heart? No. It would be so, and the whole nature become callous and dense, but for the other side of the law, which works in the active powers. When the fellow-feeling of pain, the sympathetic distress, which is a potent excitement to merciful occupations and hard labors, should grow weak by experience of it, what would become of the helpless sufferers and who would be moved to toil for their relief, if the active exertions of relief were not confirmed and established by repetition in proportion as the sympathetic pain is weakened? But it is confirmed, and becomes a noble habit. Thus the law provides that human suffering shall be ministered to and relieved, but with less and less distress to the faithful workers among the wretched; so that a charitable or professional laborer amid diseases and distresses is eased of severe pangs of sympathetic misery, but is confirmed in his labor to relieve the wretchedness. With every new deed of merciful duty, the suffering of sympathy grows less, and more tolerable, but the habit and power of will to do the benefit grows more confirmed and imperious. Ever more and more the benevolent worker is spared suffering, and the active habit of succoring distress takes the place of painful pity in defending the sufferer from neglect.

Now if this law of the passive affections and the active powers be understood, we will apply it to the relations of the moral nature and the religious nature. Religious feeling is a passive affection, a succession of emotions, perhaps excitements, fervencies, agitations, ecstasies, in which the soul puts forth no effort. We have no part in these excited states or emotions but sufferance or consciousness of them. According to the law of

passive affections, therefore, these feelings, fervors, desires, being unfollowed by action or labor, are weakened with every repetition of them, every self-surrender to them. But when they take outward shape in forms, expressive actions, attendance on assemblies, practice of observances, and many acts by which religious emotions seek to impart and enforce themselves, these are acts of will, of intention and decision, and therefore, according to the law of the active powers, are confirmed and compacted by every exercise of them. Every repetition, therefore, of emotions in religion, with accompanying actions or observances, tends to a weakening of the spirit and a confirming or solidifying of the form or observance, just as every instance of the physician's duty tends to a weakening of his feeling for the sufferer but a confirming of his exertions to relieve the suffering. But the desirableness of the effects in the two cases, is very different. It is well, and to be desired thankfully, that the physician should wane and attenuate in his inward sensitiveness to misery, while his outward tendency to relieve it is confirmed and enlarged in the same degree. But, all contrariwise, in religious experience, it is the force and purity of the feeling which is precious and to be preserved by every means, while the outward acts or forms in which the emotion utters itself are the unimportant, transient and changeable part which ought not to be emphasized in comparison. Yet it is just this external and unimportant part which is confirmed and set forward, by violence of emotions in religion and by frequent excitation of them, while the inward fact, the spirit, life, truth, earnest and deep feeling, wanes in the same measure. The law is very simple. By repetition, the emotion, which is the passive affection, is weakened, the form or expression, which is the active exercise, is confirmed.

Hence revivals, gotten up to act like stimulants on flagging and flaccid emotions. Hence also dead forms, which once were the expansion of living and truthful feeling, but now have become lifeless practices, like mummies, once bodies of life, now equally bodies, but embalmed in the preservatives and shrouds of habit.

Such is the sure tendency and fate of resort to emotion in religion by itself and as something to be sought in itself. The inefficient observances or forms will become habit, the life gradually wane and fade away, leaving behind it a dim memory which often becomes superstition.

But now look at this same law as it has effect in moral experience. We shall find that morality, by this law, fares otherwise than religious emotions and forms, indeed just contrariwise. The moral experience is like to the religious expression in this, that there are two parts to it, the part of feeling and the part of action. But they differ in the relative value of the parts which are confirmed by exercise; for in religious emotions and expression of them, it is the unimportant part, the form, which grows into consequence and power, but in moral experience, it is the important part. A moral experience includes an emotion or impulse or reverence unto the right; perhaps at the same moment there is also a strong desire unto the wrong; then there is inward struggle. That is the emotional part, the part of passive affection, in which the mind simply is conscious of emotions seizing on it. On that follows the deed, the coming of emotion into outward form and sensible existence, a right deed or a wrong deed, according to the nature of the inward emotion which has prevailed, whether the reverence for the right or the desire for the wrong. That is the active part, in which the will has exercise and domain. In every moral experience, these two parts, the passive part and the active part, are combined. Now, it is true that in every instance of moral experience, the passive affection, which is the conscious impulse or desire unto some especial righteousness, whatever it be, is weakened as an emotion, by the recurrence of it; but in the same moment and measure the outward moral act is confirmed and established by every repetition of it; and when the moral act is one of faithfulness and right, the habit of that excellence grows in the same measure as the conscious emotion unto it declines. Wherefore, in the domain of good and steadfast moral action we behold this divine beauty, namely, that intensity of loyalty and longing unto the right and good, if diminished by recurrence of those feelings, is diminished only in proportion as the right and good are realized and put forth in action. The longing to be and do right, in the healthy conscience, ceases as a conscious motive,—as an expenditure of force, shall I say?—but only to be stored up as reserved power and confirmed action in the whole being, an efficient and unthwarted streaming of the being to the right and good, even deep below the surface of consciousness. This is the highest concep-

tion of moral force, the doing of good but knowing it not; knowing it not because then we are acting out not a desire or emotion, but the emotion transformed into a habit of action, which is to say, into a deep stream of will, a settled and vital nature. This is the exact opposite of the result of emotion and the expression thereof in religion sought for themselves and in themselves; they forever are translating the inward into the outward, the feeling, or life, into the form; but moral faithfulness forever is translating the outward into the inward, the action into very power and being.

But now you will say to me perhaps, Must all emotion fade by its own exercise? Must religious feeling, once called forth, weaken and decline thereafter with the recurrence of it? Are we doomed thus to have our most exalted feelings, our noblest raptures, grow apathetic, lifeless, inefficient, by our very experience of them? Is to feel them the same thing as to begin to feel them not? And is it so, too, with human love? Must its joy and rapture run a fatal course toward indifference? Must the path of all feeling be a downward grade to impassiveness?

Yes, if unaccompanied by moral action; but if associated with ethical activity, no!

Here comes to view another strange and beautiful fact or law within us, to wit: *Painful* feelings that come of love, the distresses of sympathy, tend to wane by exercise and repetition of them, whereby we are spared suffering, while the charitable active faithfulness, confirmed to a strong habit, takes the place of the sympathetic distress as a motive power for the relief of the unhappy. But *the joys* of love, which are trust, hope, tenderness, gratefulness, are *fed*, not replaced, by moral action. In all ways the sweetness and richness of love is more and better by reason of good deeds of love done and grown into a habit of inventing and applying benefits to our beloved. The divine joyful feelings of love die not nor wane by immersion of us in them unless unconnected with active service. But *then* they wane and perish surely. I am persuaded that very much of the most sad sorrows and pains in the world come from the ignorance of all kinds of lovers, or else their thoughtlessness, or else an indolent quality of love (if then it can be called love), by all which reasons the love begins and ends in emotions, in ecstasies, in soft suffusions of

feeling. 'Tis certain, by the law ruling in all passive affections, that these will wane by exhaustion if there be no source of supply and invigoration of them beyond the mere effusion and swelling of themselves. Hence those loves that begin and end in the passage through the soul of soft emotions, glowings, ardors, flushes of feeling, will wane, and burn down to ashes by inexorable law. It is only active service of one's beloved, energy in considering, procuring and applying help, weal, profit, benefit and blessings in love's behalf, that can feed and support the delicate and beautiful raptures of affection. Let all who live together in houses beware!

So it is with religious feeling. Of itself it will wane, waste and wither under recurrence; the law is upon it. But it is *fed* by moral energy. "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments," said Jesus; but conversely it is true—"If ye keep my commandments, ye shall be able to love me." Love of God will dry and perish if it drink not of the spring of obedience to God. The grace, fervor, truth of the inward love, especially its continuance as a sublime power at need, can be maintained only by the force and sincerity of outward action. And for this great office, to be the well-spring of the joy and rapture of feeling which else would wane by its own exercise,—for this office moral energy is sufficient. For not only is moral power noble in all instances, but it may grow from more to more continually, and be ever the increasing source of a more glorious emotion. For always there will be work enough to tax the will. How strong soever it grow by victories won and heights climbed, always there will be new "holy wars" to be waged, always new heights to be attained of virtue, power and knowledge.

Here then we behold again a depth in the Master's words, "If any man willeth to do the will of God, he shall know of the teaching." Religious feeling, and therewith knowledge, unto the being of God, his glory in the out-world, his light in the soul, his presence in both, is to be kept in health and strength, yea, in life, only by moral action. To will to do the Eternal and All-holy Will is the one way unto knowledge of the Eternal and Infinite Love. We shall call unto Duty with a strong voice; yea, weary with the "unchartered freedom" of emotions, call with vehement voice, and say with the poet,—

"Through no disturbance of my soul,
Or strong compunction in me wrought
I supplicate for thy control ;
But in the quietness of thought :
Me this unchartered freedom tires ;
I feel the weight of chance desires :
My hopes no more must change their name,
I long for a repose that ever is the same.

Stern Lawgiver ! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace ;
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face ;
Flowers laugh before thee on their beds,
And fragrance in thy footing treads ;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong ;
And the most ancient heavens through thee are strong."

